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Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès, 6 novembre 2015

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One-day symposium "Small Town America"

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès, 6 novembre 2015

Claire Cazajous-Augé and Jérémy Potier

- 1 The first in a series of scientific events to be devoted to the exploration of "common places" (CAS 2, "Poétiques," Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès), the symposium "Small Town America" was organized by Nathalie Cochoy and Étienne Février (Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès) and held on Friday, November 6, 2015 in Toulouse. The morning session focused on the work of Pulitzer-winner novelist and short story writer Steven Millhauser, the guest of honor of the conference. Throughout the afternoon, the panel of experts and the participants were given the opportunity to discuss the highly problematic representation of the American small town—itsself a major locus in Steven Millhauser's fiction—drawing on a variety of materials, including photography and prose. The symposium came to an end at the Cave Poésie, in the heart of the city, where Steven Millhauser and scholar and translator Marc Chénétier (Université Paris Diderot) offered the audience a bilingual reading of the short story "Clair de Lune."
- 2 A specialist of the topic, Etienne Février started out by providing the audience with a brief introduction to the writer's prose work, calling attention to the multifaceted, composite nature of a corpus that resists labeling. Opening a collection of short stories by Steven Millhauser, the reader is drawn from the Arabian nights to the American small town, from the American tall tale to the fairy tale, or from the ordinary to the extraordinary. What he or she is invariably greeted with is the *intuition* of otherworldly realms on the verge of being revealed. A genuine craftsman, Steven Millhauser succeeds in embedding the gigantic within the miniature, gifting his readers with the experience of an ever-renewed encounter with "a world of worlds."

Steven Millhauser, "The Ambition of the Short Story"

- 3 The guest of honor of the symposium opened the morning session by reading out one of his pieces on the art of short story writing. In his essay, Steven Millhauser pointed out

that the short story is oftentimes thought of as an unassuming form of fiction, one that is condemned to develop in the shade of the much more ambitious novel. Yet, he argued that the strength of brief narratives is to be found in their very form, for after undertaking a process of radical exclusion, the short story writer is free to give perfect shape to what little remains. Unlike the all-embracing novel, the short story might well be fated to deal with "a grain of sand," but this carefully crafted grain, this insignificant portion of the world, is to unfold, indeed, to blossom, under the eyes of the attentive reader; the short story is ultimately tasked with unveiling universal truths, thereby disclosing the macrocosmic hidden within the microcosmic. The method of the short story, according to Steven Millhauser, lies in revelation, that is, in a relentless process of expansion of the microcosmic. "To see a World in a Grain of Sand" (William Blake)—behind what was identified as a façade of modesty, is the colossal ambition of the short story.

Marc Chénétier (Université Paris Diderot), Nathalie Cochoy (Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès), Etienne Février (Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès), "An Interview with Steven Millhauser"

- 4 The first address was followed by an interview with Steven Millhauser. Answering the questions of Marc Chénétier, Nathalie Cochoy and Etienne Février, the author was given the opportunity to evoke some of the biographical reasons that first led him to write about American small towns. He thus mentioned his childhood feeling of belonging to a community wider than that of a family—a feeling that he believes to be specific to small town life. This early sense of community life has fueled, in turn, his artistic practice. By way of example, the collective voice of rumors—which is part of a broader set of social practices brought about by the close setting of small towns—has proved to be a useful narrative tool, one that may indeed be instrumental in the fictional recreation of space.
- 5 A significant part of the conversation was devoted to Steven Millhauser's relationship to margins and boundaries. Small towns were thus defined as ideal playgrounds for an author who rejoices in crossing borders, an author who, for instance, is keen on using realistic precision so as to turn common places into mythical realms. Although he defined himself as a writer of realist prose, Steven Millhauser mentioned his taste for disrupting the traditions attached to the writing of realist short stories. Any piece of literature, he observed, is based on an act of seduction; the step-by-step metamorphosis of realistic descriptions into a fabled fabric therefore surfaces as a way of seducing the reader into a world of fantasy. Likewise, the momentum behind Millhauser's practice was defined by Marc Chénétier as a relentless movement swinging back and forth between opposite fields, between, that is, sheer description and suggestion, nature and art, or between history and myths. Yet, the author never picks a side; he remains on the fence, or indeed, on both sides of the fence at all times. This desire, he claimed, might be rooted in his growing up in a small town, or in the early appeal for large cities, for otherness, necessarily experienced by an American child growing up in a small town. Finally, commenting on the formal boundary that stands between prose and poetry, Steven Millhauser acknowledged that, although a degree of

overlap might well allow for playful experimentation, the delight experienced by the writer of fixed form remains specific to verse.

- 6 Answering Nathalie Cochoy's remarks on translating Steven Millhauser's work, Marc Chénétier touched upon the issue of finding the "right" tone to translate a voice or a mood. He also mentioned specific difficulties related to the translation of creative compounds, as well as substantives such as "moon," which become, in the Millhauser lexicon, genuine icons. For Marc Chénétier, each and every translation project comes with its own set of difficulties, and the delight experienced by the translator arises from overcoming these specific puzzles. Being both a translator and a close reader of Steven Millhauser's work, he observed that it is his trying to come to a better understanding of the artist's praxis that eventually helped him translate his work, rather than the opposite. The translator's practice is therefore continually fueled by that of the academic.
- 7 Eventually, as though he wished to give further substance to what was previously identified as a desire to stand on both sides of things at all times, Steven Millhauser decided to ask the panel and the audience a question that was to act as a golden thread of sorts throughout the day: is there anything about his short stories that may be defined as American?

Jean Kempf (Université Lumière - Lyon 2), "In the heart of the heart of the country. The Missouri Photo Workshop (1949-2014): Sixty-odd Years of Photographing an American Microcosm"

- 8 Jean Kempf started his presentation by mentioning how saturated the small town discourse appears to be. Yet, even though fictional works taking place in small towns are a commonplace in American literature, the academic production on the topic is rather scarce. The small town, he pointed out, belongs to the realm of recognition and can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. In order to lay bare the pre-constructed and formulaic character of the definition of such a place, Jean Kempf focused on the example of the Missouri Photo Workshop.
- 9 Every year since 1949, the Missouri Photo Workshop has gathered junior photojournalists for a week. As Jean Kempf confirmed, the workshop has had an immense impact on the profession; it is considered a training school for aspiring photographers, who, working under the supervision of senior photojournalists, are each year given a subject to shoot and edit in a Missouri small town. Rather than attempting to depict the so-called reality of Midwestern towns, the pictures that are exhibited at the end of each workshop reveal how American society perceives and defines itself. The small town thus functions as a microcosm, a metonymy of the United States. The production of the Missouri Photo Workshop also partakes in unveiling the formulaic dimension that underlies our perception of American small towns. In this regard, the written texts that more often than not come with the photographs shape the small town just as well as they shape the very format of the photographic essay. Because it presents very standardized and repetitive stories—family lives or community service for example—, the Missouri Photo Workshop confirms—and plays a part in the construction of—the way we perceive the American small town: a place

where family life and the community are built around the resilience of an exceptional character. Studying the work of the aspiring photographers over the years, small towns quickly surface as places where social links are particularly strong, sheltered areas where one might search, and perhaps find, peace and stasis in a constantly changing world. Each year, the Missouri Photo Workshop testifies that, in an age of globalization, there is indeed something like home.

Monica Manolescu-Oancea (Université de Strasbourg), "New Jersey and Artistic Experimentation. On Robert Smithson's Passaic"

- 10 Monica Manolescu-Oancea first observed that New Jersey is generally perceived as a non-place, or a place without an essence, and is therefore not readily considered an appropriate site for artistic expression and/or experimentation. Yet, an alternative narrative seeking to unearth the artistic potential of 1960s New Jersey has recently emerged; it was notably articulated through several exhibitions that revisit the *topos* of suburbia (a pioneer example would be "New Jersey as Non-Site," the exhibition organized by the Princeton University Art Museum in 2013).
- 11 In 1967, Robert Smithson published a series of black and white photographs together with a short text entitled "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey." Smithson was interested in low-profile landscapes (swamps, deserts, remote islands, etc.) and saw in the banal and abandoned structures of the small town the material he needed to compose his short photographic essay. For instance, he photographed monuments under construction, but waited for the weekend to take pictures in order for the building process to be interrupted. Many artists in the 1960s expressed interest in new constructions rather than in romantic ruins, relishing in the practice of "negative sightseeing." The construction sites of Passaic appeared to be ruins before they were built and confirmed Nabokov's observation that "[t]he future is but the obsolete in reverse." Smithson's essay also reveals that New Jersey was not simply the negative, or "blank," opposite of New York City, but formed a more complex urban reality. His tour was thereby endowed with a polemic dimension, as the artist wished to protest against the centralization of the New York City art establishment.

Anne Ullmo (Université François Rabelais - Tours), "I know you can't resist me': The Metamorphoses of the Department Store in Steven Millhauser's Small Town America"

- 12 The characters in Steven Millhauser's stories are often teenagers who seek to embark on extraordinary adventures. Their restlessness and impatience are epitomized by the sentence "What was it that we wanted?" (from the short story "Elsewhere"). Anne Ullmo thus suggested that Millhauser's characters seem to be drawn by an irrepressible desire to escape their daily lives so as to experience otherness. Yet, in Steven Millhauser's stories, otherness is to be found within the very fabric of the ordinary. In

this view, the metamorphic dimension of the small town, a place which is always under construction, may well lead to experiencing a feeling of *unheimlich*.

- 13 In order to disclose how such a process of defamiliarization might work in Steven Millhauser's fiction, Anne Ullmo focused on the story "The Dream of the Consortium" (1998). Department stores—which are displayed in *Martin Dressler* already, but also in more recent stories—have exerted fascination on the writer. At first, the numerous lists and descriptions may be thought to convey a sense of realism. But, rather than trying to reorganize the bric-a-brac of the real world (Philippe Hamon), the descriptive process in the story aims at creating the illusion of an all-encompassing world. Inflating the descriptive fabric with long lists and descriptions, Steven Millhauser may well sabotage the referential illusion, but also proves that there can be many worlds in a single page. The writer's narrative strategy draws on the intermingling of the artificial and the fantastic, of dream and reality, fear and desire. The coexistence of opposites is at the core of *Martin Dressler*, while the settings of many of Millhauser's stories, from turn-of-the-century amusement parks to department stores, create a sense of phantasmagoria.

Marie Bouchet (Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès), "Nabokov's Small Town America: The Land of the Philistines Re-enchanted"

- 14 In her presentation, Marie Bouchet wished to leave aside the oft-mentioned Nabokovian habit of mocking America; instead, she chose to explore the aspects of Nabokov's writing that can be said to re-enchant the American reality. It is in *Lolita* that Nabokov experiences the thrills of his transformation into an American writer and exposes the beauty of American suburbs. The alliterations, the precision in the description of the shapes, colors and texture of objects, as well as the overwhelming presence of adjectives, all reveal Humbert Humbert's fascination for American small towns. In this novel, Nabokov's scientific and artistic delight in details meet, allowing the writer to adopt a taxonomist's eye in surveying the suburban landscape. According to the author, details are to imbue the work of fiction with life. Nabokov provides clues and details to identify most small towns in *Lolita*. However, he also occasionally and deliberately blurs those referential traces. Resorting to nighttime visions particularly allows Nabokov to open up gaps in reality and in the textual fabric. Not only does he re-enchant the ordinary, but he also refashions the rules of realistic fiction. As to the paratactic structures that he uses, they do not function as inventories; rather, they reveal Nabokov's power of invention. The description of bathing suits, for instance, partakes in re-enchanting the most trivial reality: "dream pink, frosted aqua, glans mauve, tulip red, oolala black."
- 15 The symposium offered all the participants the opportunity to foreground the duality of the American small town. A crossroads where the banal and the exceptional meet, the small town setting becomes a playground for writers and photographers to reinvent the most familiar things in life and re-enchant the ordinary world.

Steven Millhauser and Marc Chénétier, A Reading at the "Cave Poésie," Toulouse.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Links and resources

Program available at: <http://cas.univ-tlse2.fr/small-town-america-388390.kjsp>

Interview with Steven Millhauser available at: http://www.canal-u.tv/video/universite_toulouse_ii_le_mirail/an_interview_with_steven_millhauser.19390

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